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Back on deck, admiral

Adm. Stansfield Turner took over the bridge as director of the Central Intelligence Agency in March with a clear mandate from the White House, the Congress and the people to clean up the demonstrated abuses of the CIA and make it an effective agency operating under the rule of law. He has instead distracted himself by scrambling for power in the halls of Washington to the neglect of his CIA flagship at Langley, Va.

What Turner wants is to be grand admiral of all U.S. intelligence — the National Security Agency and National Reconnaissance Office as well as the CIA. These two agencies are responsible for international eavesdropping by spy satellites and super-sophisticated electronic means and consume 80 per cent of the U.S. intelligence budget, the rest going to the CIA. They are under the thumb of the Pentagon, and Defense Sec. Harold Brown is fighting fiercely to keep them there. In that battle, Turner is spending an inordinate amount of time in the White House and next door in the Executive Office Building.

Meanwhile, back at Langley, the timbers continue to rot. Our Washington correspondent, Keyes Beech, reports that morale has ebbed among civilian professionals who feel isolated from their commander by the cordon of naval officers he has put on watch. Options are demanded and decisions made by memo, barring personal and essential give and take.

Aside from the harm caused by the distraction of Turner, there are serious doubts about the merit of

his position on centralizing all intelligence operations. Despite the efficiency that such reorganization might bring, we agree with those who say that in the sensitive area in which intelligence operatives work there is virtue in a process of consecutive dissent, debate and consensus. And we would be reluctant to give one superdirector all the power that would accrue to him.

President Carter thus far has left it to subordinates to judge whether the office of superdirector should be created, with the promise that he will decide if there is no agreement. We urge him to speed the process by deciding now to leave the intelligence organizations decentralized as they are, thus waking the admiral from his imperial ambitions and getting him back on deck.